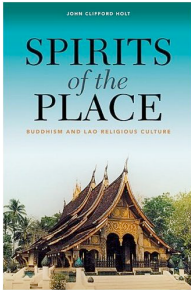


REVIEW: *SPIRITS OF THE PLACE*

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Holt, John Clifford. 2009. *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. xiii+348. Black and white photographs and maps throughout, seven color plates after page 194, Lao transformations of the *Ramayana*, description of the cult of *kwan*, chapter notes, bibliography, index. ISBN: 978-0-8248-3327-5 (hardcover, 58USD).

John Holt draws deeply upon more than twenty years of scholarship on the Theravadin world in *Spirits of the Place*, a work that analyzes the historical role of Buddhism in Laos. This work will appeal to scholars in such diverse fields as history, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, US foreign policy, and area studies. In this study Holt turns his focus to the Lao ethnic majority of Laos and the Lao ethnic minority of Isan Province, Thailand,¹ in five chapters that compellingly combine historiographic and anthropological analysis, including what (MacDaniel 2010:120) has referred to as "the best Literature review of scholarship on Lao religion to date..."

In Chapter One, Holt disentangles the Lao tradition from generalizations about Tai peoples by invoking what he sees as fundamental Lao religious structures, wherein *ban*² and the *muang*³

¹ The terms Lao and Laos are used to refer to the ethnic group and nation, respectively.

² *Ban* is a Tai language family term referring to the smallest administrative division. For highland Tai populations living in Vietnam the term is the Vietnamized *bản*. *Ban* is the root of localized Lao society and often translated as 'village'.

³ *Muang* is also Romanized *meuang* and *muong* and Vietnamized as *mường*. It refers to an administrative division above the *ban* level. During the French colonial period, Lao territory was reorganized into three *muang*. In contemporary Laos, *muang* are subdivisions of provinces. Historically *muang* referred to small confederations or principalities.

enable understanding of how religious worship has been constructed around *phi*⁴ spirit cults in traditional Lao culture. Holt argues that these *phi* cults, combined with *kwan*⁵ worship, have created a "religious substratum" that represents an underlying cultural layer to Lao religious practice. This underlying cultural layer is thus a lens through which a unique interpretation of Theravadin tradition (20-21) is constructed in Lao culture.

Holt's exploration of the historiography of Lao religious culture draws theoretical influence from the work of prolific French Orientalist, Paul Mus. Specifically, Holt employs Mus's concepts of the "gods of the soil," constructions of "mesocosmic space," and readings of the "monsoon religions" (22-23). Holt relates each of these concepts to the Lao context, between the microcosm and the macrocosm. His explorations of archeological evidence of blended Theravada and Mahayana practices during the eleventh to twelfth centuries in the contemporaneous Nanzhao in China (32) are historically interesting in their broadening of what has been conceived of as the Theravadin world. Holt continues this observation of blended Theravadin practice by examining the central Buddha image for the Lao people (Phra Bang) that they worship, as he argues "as if it were a Hindu deity" (46-7). However, it must be noted that the centralized Lao Luom (ethnic lowland Lao) identities have on occasion tried to separate the authority of such spirit cults from Buddhist authority.

One such period of attempted separation occurred during the colonial period. In Chapter Two, Holt draws upon the region's established historiography to demonstrate the lack of French-sponsored infrastructure development projects compared to the rest of Indochina. He points out that in place of infrastructure, the French established the Buddhist Institute in Vientiane, which in turn sought to provide a Buddhist intellectual counterbalance to the popularization of rational Buddhism under Thai authorities in the wake of the 1902 Sangha act. The aim was to develop a uniquely Lao

⁴ *Phi* is Lao for 'spirits'. *Ho phi* are *phi* shrines, *phi ban* are village guardian spirits, *phi muang* are spirits of the *muang*, and *phi vat* are temple spirits.

⁵ *Kwan* is Lao and refers to vital essence or soul.

version of rationalized Buddhism and to 'demythologize' contexts that were seen as prone to Millenarianism, such as that experienced by the French throughout the highlands of Vietnam and regions of the Mekong Delta (86-97). Thus support was given for such concepts as *anicca* (impermanence), *paticcasumpada* (dependent origination), and *bhavana* (meditative practice to cultivate higher states of awareness). Furthermore, the concepts of *sila* (morality), *panna* (wisdom), and *samadhi* (concentrated meditation) were emphasized through the reform, which drew authority from Cambodia after the appearance of the Khmer monk, Choun Naht, in Vientiane at the inauguration of the institute (97). In the end, the centralization of an attempted rationalist Buddhist authority, under the dominance of French colonialism, further alienated highland populations, while simultaneously drawing on Buddhist authority (Jackson 1988, Swearer 1989, and Lopez 2007).

After examining the French consolidation of rational Buddhism in Laos, Holt discusses America's fateful role, which hinged on President Eisenhower's advice during his departure from office in 1961: "If Laos is lost to the Free World, in the long run we will lose all of Southeast Asia" (116). What followed was a violent and devastating conflict that led the Pathet Lao to power.⁶ Holt demonstrates that the Pathet Lao were generally perceived as non-Buddhist, although they did "trumpet Buddhism for the sake of national unity" (125), thus initially radicalizing certain members of the Buddhist sangha to supporting the Pathet Lao (128).

In Chapter Three, Holt argues that rationalist causes emerged in cooperation with the state and attempted once again to purge the practice of *phi* worship with the emergence of the Lao PDR under the authority of the Pathet Lao (160). However, the new Lao state failed to create a unified rationalization of Buddhism that united the entire sangha with Marxism. Holt reports that the party was unsure what to do after the demise of the state headman, Keysone. This circumstance is then contrasted with the passing of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, and

⁶ The Pathet Lao was the Marxist guerrilla group that established the government of the Communist Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR).

the party successfully transforming him into one of Mus's "gods of the soil" (171). Holt suggests that an essential contestation exists between the state, or the party, and the common practice of spirit cults (175). This tension, combined with an abrupt confrontation with modernity and the international tourist industry, has gone on to change characteristics examined by Holt in his conversation with *sameneras*⁷ who have just entered the sangha.

In Chapter Four, Holt begins his narrative of the changing practice of the *sameneras* through an expression of his "discomfort" with their use of cell phones, riding motorbikes, and chatting with tourist girls (193). This contrast between expectations and reality demonstrates misunderstandings of the practice of Buddhism rooted in Holt's dissertation research. Holt reveals these misconceptions to be common Euro-American assumptions about the behavior of the ideal ascetic *bhikku*. These *sameneras* contrast with such pre-existing notions in their adaptation of commoditized Buddhism through artistic aesthetics. Capitalizing on Buddhism as a means of social mobility is more prevalent than the preservation of notions from the *Vinaya* holy texts that act as guiding precepts for members of the sangha (198-206, Wijayaratna 1990).

In Chapter Five, Holt argues that the roots of Buddhist values and the practice of spirit cults are inseparable in contemporary Laos. The potency of many spirit cults is derived from the magical power of the *mo tham* (holy ritual specialist) based on their ability to observe the *pancasila* (five precepts), which are also essential to the ethical practice of Buddhism (Anonymous nd). Through observation of the *pancasila*, the *mo tham* derive magical power from the root of *thamma*, a Lao expression linguistically and conceptually linked to the Pali *dhamma* and the Sanskrit *dharma* (247). As such, Holt concludes, "Buddhist karmic rationalization has not thoroughly penetrated, rationalized, or domesticated the spirit cults of Laos" (237), as the *phi* vigorously survive due to Buddhist influence (232).

This suggests that belief in the power of *phi* and the power of the Lord Buddha are not mutually exclusive in Laos, nor are believing

⁷ *Sameneras* are young monks who have just entered the sangha generally in their pre-teen or teenage years.

in *phi* and being Christian, and therefore, finally, "It will be extremely difficult to exorcise the spirits of the place" (258).

Criticisms of this volume mirror challenges facing the study of Laos as a whole. First, the great ethno-linguistic diversity that permeates the least ethnically unified country in mainland Southeast Asia has created a disconnect between Lao and non-Lao groups in the lowlands and an inability to see continuities between Lao and Mahayana practice. A second challenge is that much of the highland populations of Laos have been marginalized by history and historiography. Fortunately, Holt's work anticipates these criticisms as he specifically noted them in his introduction and thus *Spirits of the Place* provides ample foundations for future examinations by such scholars as Ian Baird, Pao Vue, and Ryan Ford, who are determined to include the voices of the Laotian highland populations in their research.

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